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Exploring the Lower Third:

The Use, Innovations, and Future of Snipes in the U.S. Television Industry

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Communication

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts of Professional Communication

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by

Aaron M. Sharp

May 2010

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Keywords: snipes, bugs, ad-bugs, lower-thirds, television, advertising, in-content messaging,

embedded advertising, diffusion of innovation, characteristics of innovation

## ABSTRACT

Exploring the Lower Third:

The Use, Innovations, and Future of Snipes in the U.S. Television Industry

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Digital video recorders have given a growing number of viewers the ability to skip television commercials. In an effort to combat ad-skipping, television providers and advertisers are looking at ways to embed advertising into the video content; one way this can be accomplished is with graphic overlays known as snipes. Little is known about how content providers use snipes and what research they have conducted. This study is qualitative and uses long telephone interviews with 8 respondents from various cable television network and broadcast affiliate stations; examining the characteristics of innovation, as found in Rogers's (1995) diffusion of innovation theory. One discovery is that some cable networks are taking measures to ensure that snipes do not appear during emotional moments in the narrative. The study is the first piece of academic research dedicated to understanding how snipes are used and stands as a foundation for future research on the subject.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Technological innovations such as the digital video recorder (DVR) giving television audiences more control over their viewing experience, as it allows them to be active rather than passive. The DVR is a device that allows the user to *time shift*. Time shift means that the user can record television programming for later viewing; the viewer schedules when he or she watches the program rather than the video content provider. Not only can users view the recorded programming on their own schedules, they can also pause, rewind, and fast-forward through the programs. The ability to fast-forward allows the viewer to zip-through or skip the commercials of programs that have been recorded on the device. A study of DVR owners showed that 77% of respondents bought a DVR because it gave them the ability to skip over television commercials (Consoli, 2005). Approximately 30% of U.S. television households currently use ad-skipping technology (Keane, 2009). The DVR represents a real problem for both the television and advertising businesses.

The remote control has made flipping channels during commercial breaks a TV pastime since the dawn of the medium, but the rise of the DVR has exacerbated the problem even more: As more and more viewers record their favorite shows, a larger percentage of commercials are falling victim to the fast-forward button. (Falcone, 2007, par 2)

In order to combat commercial ad-skipping, a logical business move for television networks and advertisers has been to place the advertisements within the television programming itself, a practice called *product placement*. Another emerging way to combat ad-skipping is to graphically overlay a corporate logo or advertising message overtop of programming. In the U.S., the most common industry term for these overlays is *snipes*. “Snipes are different than the

network logos that pop up on screens during shows, called bugs.” (Snipes, Bugs, and More, 2007, par. 4). The word *snipe* is derived from the term used to describe the papering of ads on a construction-site (Bianculli, 2007). In the United Kingdom, a snipe is referred to as a *DOG*, which is an acronym for digital on-screen graphic or digital originated graphic (Helfand, 2005, par 2). The process may be referred to differently from network to network, but other common terms are *screen overlays*, *marketer overlays*, *bugs*, *ad-bugs*, *bug-messaging*, *in-content messaging*, *in-content advertising*, *embedded advertising*, *embedded messaging*, or *lower thirds*.

The lower third of the viewing screen – is turning into the latest land of opportunity for Madison Avenue. Advertisers more and more are claiming this real estate for themselves in the ongoing fight for viewer attention (Atkinson, 2008, par 2).

Despite the fact that snipes have been in use for over a decade and are used by almost every major cable and broadcast television network, little is known about how the television industry uses snipes. There have been no academic studies to date that examine the snipe usage in the American television industry, and little has been published in mainstream media. This study is exploratory and works as a foundation for future research on the subject of snipes, and graphically embedded advertising.

The literature review discusses the drawbacks and positive impact that snipes can have on the television and advertising industries as well as the audience. The chapter lays out the characteristics of innovation found in diffusion of innovation theory. The methodology section discusses the methods used in data collection that include long-qualitative telephone interviews with experts from various cable networks and broadcast stations. The results discuss findings such as the length of time video content providers have used snipes for promotional purposes and for advertising along with techniques networks are using to prevent snipes from being a nuisance

to the audience. The discussions examine the results in the relation to characteristics of innovation. The implications and limitations of the study are discussed as well as possible future research.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses the issues that are facing the television industry and advertisers. An argument is laid out for the use of snipes to aid in combating ad-skipping. Drawbacks and issues that arise from the use of snipes are also addressed. The chapter contains examples and a brief history of snipes and other forms of embedded advertising. This chapter also illustrates the effects and possible implications of using snipes for video content providers, advertisers, and the audience.

#### Product Placement and Product Integration

There are three basic ways in that networks can insert advertisements into programming: product placements, product integration, and through the use of graphics. Two common forms of in-content advertising is product placement and product integration. Product placement refers to “the positioning of images of a brand or product in an entertainment medium”; it has been around since the silent film era and later moved to television (Winkler & Buckner, 2006, p.24). Product placement in television dates back to the 1940s when shows such as *The Colgate Comedy Hour* were fully financed by advertisers; the host would plug the product during the program so there was no separation between programming and advertisements (Mueller, 2006). The practice of product placement has become increasingly popular because of ad skipping technology. Countries such as the United Kingdom, that prohibit product placement, have lifted the ban because it was causing financial harm to the British TV industry (Product Placement Ban, 2010).

Product integration is the most involved process for in-content advertising as it calls for the assimilation of a product into the storyline of a program. In order for product integration to

occur, the writers of a TV show or movie must write storyline for a product. The James Bond film *Die Another Day* reportedly had 20 product integration sponsors that contributed \$100 million in sponsorship fees. Despite the financial success of these arrangements, the filmmakers received criticism for being nothing short of a long advertisement, leading some critics to refer to the film as *Buy Another Day* (Howard, 2006). *Die Another Day* is an example of product integration overload but there are many films and television programs that have integrated products in ways that is both beneficial to advertisers and embraced by audiences, such as the *Junior Mint* episode of television series *Seinfeld* (Fitzgerald, 2003). Advertisers receive real additional value with product integration according to CBS Chairman Les Moonves. “You’re going to see some shows doing [product integration] extremely well, where you’re hardly aware that you’ve been sold something” (as cited in Donatan, 2004, p.154).

The praise of product integration by network executives and advertisers is not shared by all in the industry. The Writers Guild of America West, WGAW, that represents thousands of television and film script writers, filed a docket with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 2008 expressing its concern for the lack of adequate disclosure regarding product placement and product integration (MB Docket No. 08-90). It is the position of the WGAW that television networks and advertisers do not have the right to mislead viewers in their attempt to combat ad-skipping. Kosinski (2008) stated in comments submitted to the FCC, “Just because viewers use a DVR component to watch programming does not mean that they waive their right to know when they are watching advertising” (p.3). The WGAW requested that the FCC mandate a real time *crawl* on the screen simultaneously disclosing any embedded advertising (Kosinski, 2008). According to Robert Weissman, the managing director of Commercial Alert, a nonprofit group for limiting commercial marketing, product placement is “a huge, out-of-control

issue (representing) fundamental encroachments on the independent programming” (as cited in Clifford, 2008).

The use of graphic overlays allows the advertisers to have their brands seen during programming and thus preventing DVR ad-skips. Snipes are straightforward and that could make them a positive alternative to product placement and integration. Though some television writers and consumers may have other issues with snipes, it does not change the creative content, nor is it misleading. Although the use snipes for advertising is a logical alternative or supplement to product placement and integration, this form of advertising has yet to be widely adopted by networks at the present date. One impediment to using them is the risk of offending viewers.

#### Upsetting the Viewers

Television networks are faced with the question of how to use snipes without driving away viewers. Gary Carr, senior vice president and director of broadcasting services at *TagertCast tcm*, commented about the use of snipes, “I understand the networks are trying to monetize content and advertisers want their message to be seen but no one ever seems to think about the viewer” (as cited in Atkinson, 2008, par 21). Scott Lerman, president at Enterprise IG in New York, a brand consulting agency that is part of WPP Group, stated that on-screen advertising is “shockingly crude and inappropriate” and that viewers would get angry because they would judge it to be a nuisance (as cited in Elliot, 2001, par 7&8). The sentiment was shared by Herbert Jack Rotfield, professor of marketing at Auburn University and editor of the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, it is his view that the constant commercial breaks, repetitive promos, and graphics are going to drive viewers away (as cited in Atkinson, 2008, par 22).

RQ 1: Have the video content producers done any research that gauges audience attitudes of snipes?

A number of viewers have created online Blogs to express their distain of intrusion into their favorite programs. Sherry Skylar, a writer in Phoenix, Arizona, wrote that the clutter on television “has gotten worse – more movement and more intrusive” (as cited in Lee, 2007, par 21). Skylar also commented that when a character from one program walks onto the screen during another show, “it’s a total disconnect and ruins your suspension of disbelief” (as cited in Lee, 2007, par 21). Professor Rotfield, stated that snipes “detracts from the program—they’re covering part of the screen” (as cited in Atkinson, 2008, par 22). If snipes are placed on the screen without regard to what is going on during the program, the audience could miss information vital to the plot. Gretchen Corbin, a technical writer in Berkeley, California, commented on a snipe that appeared on the screen during a film with subtitles, “Some ad just took over the entire bottom of the screen so I missed what the characters said to each other” (as cited in Lee, 2007, par 3).

RQ 2: Are video content providers concerned that snipes could cover up important visual content?

Although many bloggers have expressed their distain and sometimes outright hatred of snipes, the outrage may only be temporary. When television branding (id-bug, logo-bug, or station-bug) first began to be used, some viewers responded negatively. These bugs are an on-screen image of the station logo that appear in the corner of the screen and act as a watermark to identify the station. Examples of bugs are the CBS eye, the NBC peacock, and the ABC dot. Groups of angry viewers even formed watchdog groups like *Squash the TV Bugs* to exchange information, raise public awareness, and protest the television networks (Helfand, 2005, par 3). Despite the initial reaction by some consumers, bugs are standard practice in both broadcasting and cable industries. It is commonplace to see bugs not only on national networks but on local

broadcasting stations as well. Rich Hamilton, chief executive for the North American operations at *Zenith OptiMedia*, an agency that buys commercial time for marketers and a subsidiary of the *Publicis Groupe*, said, “History has shown that when consumers are exposed to advertising in places where advertising has not been in the past, they initially react negatively – then accept it” (as cited in Elliot, 2001, par 11).

### The Effectiveness of Snipes

A study conducted in 2007 by the Center for Media Design used eye-tracking to gauge if viewers paid attention to promotional snipes that appear on-screen during television programming; the results showed that “very little attention was paid to promotional snipes during programming and that recall after the programming segment had been viewed was nonexistent or minimal at best” (Bloxham, 2007, par 6). It is unclear if the television industry is aware of these findings or if they have conducted their own research that contradicts the study. Adam Stotsky, president of marketing for NBC Entertainment, stated that viewers have developed a “capacity to accept multiple messages all at once” (as cited in Keane, 2009, par 4). George Schweitzer, president of CBS Marketing group, added that because consumers have adapted to taking in multiple communications, snipes have become “a given of the current TV landscape – cable and network” (as cited in Keane, 2009, par 4).

RQ 3: Have video content providers conducted any research on the effectiveness of snipes?

Smit (1999) showed that respondents view television commercials negatively because they perceive the advertisements as an interruption. In-content advertising does not pause or stop the program in progress and therefore may be viewed as less annoying. In an attempt to find the most efficient and audience friendly form of online video advertising, *MTV Networks*



(MTVN) launched *Project Inform*; the project tested three different forms of advertisements in short form online video clips (O'Malley, 2009). The three formats of advertisements were a 30-second preroll, a 5-second preroll coupled with a 10-second lower-third ad, and a 5-second preroll coupled with a 10-second *side-loader* (O'Malley, 2009). A side-loader ad is similar to a lower-third, but it displays on the side of the screen rather than on the bottom-third of the screen. According to Nada Stirratt, MTVN's Executive Vice President of Digital Advertising, the lower-third ranked the highest when it came to "classic branding metrics like unaided awareness, aided awareness, and purchase intent" (as cited in Shields, 2009, par 4). Results of the study showed that viewers ranked the lower-third the most enjoyable advertising experience (Atkinson, 2008). In this study the snipe was not only tolerated but embraced, partially because the lower-third advertisement meant a reduction in the length of commercial breaks.

Age or generation may be a factor in consumer's acceptance or rejection of the use of snipes. *Project Inform* was done with content from MTVN that skews to a much younger demographic, 12- to 24-years-of-age. It could be that younger generations are more accepting of the visual stimulation of snipes as they have become accustomed to it on the internet and other media. The trend of making the screen busier, according to network executives, is indeed to cater to the taste of younger viewers (Lee, 2007). In catering to their younger audiences the networks may run the risk of alienating some of their older viewers.

RQ 4: Do video content providers use audience demographics in the snipe scheduling process?

RQ 5: Are audience demographics a factor in what types of programs are promoted with snipes?

The effectiveness of network promotional snipes could vary from the effectiveness of advertiser or sponsored snipes. The *Promax-Promo Analysis*, based on *TiVo Stop/Watch Syndicated Services* data, showed that promos had a higher CVI (commercial viewing index) score than other commercials (Petrilli, 2009, Table 1). The CVI rates the frequency that commercials are viewed on the DVR versus being skipped. If audiences are choosing to watch promos at a higher rate than they are commercials, perhaps audiences will pay more attention to promotional snipes than they would snipes that include advertiser messages. The data also revealed that in-network promos score slightly higher than cross-channel promos (Petrilli, 2009, Table 7). Information related to the program being watched or other shows on the network are perhaps seen as slightly more relevant than promos for other networks. Advertiser data could be seen as even less relevant to the viewing experience.

#### Visual Clutter

A potential issue that could arise from the excessive use of snipes, bugs, and other graphic overlays is clutter. Technological changes in television such as smaller portable TVs and larger high definition TVs will only serve to amplify the encroachment of screen space (Atkinson, 2008). According to Franzen (1992) audiences give only superficial attention to the communication. The more layers of communication there are for a viewer to take in the less attention that can be paid to each individual communication. Olsthoorn (2003) stated that media consumers become selective when they are provided with an abundance of media messages and, therefore, pay less attention to the message. If clutter becomes so excessive that it distracts the viewer from taking in the message, it can negatively affect the advertiser's message, the network's image, and viewer's experience.

RQ 6: Are video content providers concerned that snipes could create too much visual clutter?

Bloxham (2007) stated that the lower third of the television screen is “like the billboards that we pass on the roads... they come into our field of view and may or may not benefit from some level of attention” (par 3). Advertisers may be concerned that viewers will be paying attention to the program rather than the snipe and, therefore, their ad dollars are just as wasted as if they had spent the money on a commercial that was skipped by a DVR. One standard reason for the high rates of prime time television programming has been the less cluttered environment (Russell & Lane, 2002). Snipes and ad-bugs, even for promotional and informational purposes, could add to the clutter and be seen as distracting to the viewer.

While clutter may be seen as a negative, the use of excessive visual stimulation may be a stylistic choice. “Television is increasingly a moving wallpaper, only looked at with half an eye” (Bronner & Neijens, 2006, p.82). According to Norby Williamson, executive vice president of programming for ESPN, the network is making an effort to create a more visually stimulating and exciting viewing experience (as cited in Lee, 2007). What some may see as clutter, ESPN sees as visual engagement; and they may not be off the mark. According to David Grazian, a sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania, television is using a successful feature of video games; “Screen clutter can be extremely eye catching, especially for the viewer who surfs between several channels” (as cited in Lee, 2007). Rather than distracting from the programming, snipes and other visual elements executed properly could add to the overall viewing experience.

## Audience Fragmentation

Audience fragmentation is another issue that is facing television networks and advertisers. Even with the explosion of new media options including the internet, consumers are watching more television than ever before; despite that fact, audiences are decreasing per channel as they are becoming more fragmented or divided (Future of Media Report, 2008). The fragmentation of the television audience means that ratings for programming are decreasing across the board because of increased competition brought about by a growing number of cable television channels.

At the same time that television ratings are declining, the cost of production is increasing. It has become a difficult sell for the networks, to charge advertisers more money for less audience. Couple the higher cost for commercials and the decreasing audience with the fact that viewers are beginning to skip the commercials altogether, and television is facing a multifaceted obstacle to continuing the current business model. According to Barbara Bacci-Mirque, Senior Vice President for the Association of National Advertisers, “in the face of media fragmentation and consumer control over how they receive advertising messages – new forms of advertising are needed to reach today’s consumer (as cited in Advertising Research Foundation [ARF], 2005). In order to justify the increase cost, marketers are “seeking the so-called value-add (and) are increasingly turning to ad bugs as the answer” (Atkinson, 2008).

The television advertising model was eventually forced to change with the financial situation at hand. According to Mueller (2006) the economics of audience fragmentation and rising production cost caused the move from solo sponsored programs to multiple advertiser

commercial breaks (p. 73). The new era of increased fragmentation and sky rocketing production cost coupled with commercial skipping may lead to a new shift in the industry, and snipes could play an important role in the next generation of television consumption.

#### Advantages of Snipes for Affiliates and Syndicated Programming

According to Russell and Lane (2002) there are four issues that broadcast network affiliates have been facing for years:

1. Reduction and elimination of compensation fees.
2. Requiring fees for network affiliates.
3. Direct payments by stations to networks for special programming.
4. Reduction of commercial spots during network programming.

Compensation fees were once paid to the affiliates by the network to offset the high cost of running a broadcast television station. These fees gave each station several million dollars a year; the loss of those funds means a drastic reduction in the overall budget for local stations. The CW broadcasting network has inverted the practice of compensations fees by requiring the affiliates to pay the network. Local affiliates are now required to pay the network for the rights to retransmit certain special programs. Broadcast networks reduced the amount of commercial time assigned to affiliates during network programming. This reduction in commercial inventory further decreases the affiliates' finances.

The reduction in funds plus the increase in cost means that affiliates need to increase revenue with their syndicated programming and locally produced content including news, weather, and sports. The placement of advertising overlays during local and syndicated programming may provide a way for stations to augment revenue by increasing their profit margins on existing content with minimal overhead.

One long-term advantage to content producers is that the graphic overlays are not permanently part of the program like product placement and integration. Product placement and integration are financially beneficial to the production company and (or) the network that first airs the episode; however, the money is not paid to other networks or stations that air reruns of the program. Snipes however can easily be placed overtop of syndicated programming, both off-network and first-run syndication. Snipes and bugs are a form of advertising that lends greatly to the affiliates because they can be easily placed over any programming and are cheap to produce. Networks already give affiliates a certain number of local commercial breaks during network programming. If snipes become a norm at the network level, they could allocate the use of snipes to affiliates during network programming as well.

RQ 7: Do the broadcast networks allow affiliates to place snipes over network programming?

RQ 8: Do cable networks allow cable or satellite television providers the opportunity to place snipes over their network programming?

### The Implementation of Snipes

In 2009 Turner Network Television (TNT) unveiled its *Wide Open* format for NASCAR race coverage. The wide open construct is presented in a letterbox format where the lower-third of the screen is used to rotate advertisers' messages (Crupi, 2009). The Wide Open format allows TNT to limit the number of commercial breaks, which is a benefit to fans as it prevents them from missing the live action. According to Jon Diament, executive vice president of sales and marketing for Turner Sports, "The fan wants to watch more racing, and we can give it to them without having to sacrifice ad revenue" (as cited in Crupi, 2009). In addition to the lower-third

rotator clients receive branded content vignettes such as the 90-second spot for Burger King featuring its mascot and NASCAR driver Tony Stewart (Crupi, 2009). Because these vignettes feature NASCAR drivers, the viewers are more engaged in the advertising message. TNT's Wide Open format is one example of how networks, advertisers, and consumers can all benefit from the use of the lower-third ad platform.

TNT has had sold lower-third advertising in dramatic programming as well. In 2008 the network launched a new 1-hour legal drama *Raising the Bar*; a title sponsor, Quiznos, received tune-ins, billboards, and snipes as part of its advertising package (Crupi, 2008). TNT's sister network Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) open its original series *My Boys* with a snipe that says "You're watching *My Boys*" followed by the words "sponsored by" and the Alltel logo (Atkinson, 2008). TBS is one of the most aggressive networks in the use and innovation of snipes. To promote the TBS original series *The Bill Engvall Show*, comedian Bill Engvall walked out during an episode of *Family Guy* and literally paused the show in progress to pitch his program (Atkinson, 2008). This demonstrates Turner Entertainment's dedication to exploring the options and pushing the boundaries of lower-thirds. The opportunity to pop-up and pause the program could be offered to advertisers in the future. According to Linda Yaccarino, Turner Entertainment Executive Vice President of Advertising Sales, "when we hit on the right program and marry it with the right product, it could happen" (as cited in Atkinson, 2008).

Snipes and ad-bugs at present may not be an alternative to traditional 30-second spots but a value-add to entice advertising to buy commercial time during a program. The *National Broadcasting Corporation* (NBC) aired a snipe of a shopping cart bearing the Target logo, that rolled across the screen during an airing of the film *the Incredibles* on Thanksgiving Day 2007; NBC did not sell this as a separate ad unit, but it was a bargaining chip in the sales process

(Atkinson, 2008). During the *2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games* NBC used snipes to advertise the new film release *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (Atkinson, 2008). The *Mummy* ad was also not a sold unit because the film was produced and distributed by Universal Pictures which is a part of the corporate NBC Universal family.

RQ 9: Do video content providers allow advertisers the use of snipes?

Probe: If so, is there an additional charge for the graphics, or is it a value-add?

### Video-On-Demand

At present the DVR poses the biggest threat to television advertising; Video-On-Demand (VOD) services have become an issue as well. VOD is a technology available to a number of households (HH) through cable or satellite television services. Magna Global USA estimates that 66 million HH will have access to programming delivered by a VOD system by 2015 (U.S. video, 2010). According to Nielsen (2009) there is an estimated 114.9 million television HH for the 2009-2010 broadcast season. As of 2015 it is estimated that VOD will be available to over half of the entire US television market. According to Magna Global VOD will outperform DVRs by 2015, 66million HH vs 53 million HH (U.S. video, 2010).

Just like the DVR, VOD represents both a challenge and an opportunity to television advertising. Some VOD content is being offered to consumers as a premium service free of commercials. Other forms of VOD have commercials included in the content, but these commercials can be skipped by fast-forwarding past them, the same as with a DVR recording. Snipes and bugs could be embedded into VOD content as well, ensuring that an advertiser's message is not being skipped.



In 2006 a patent was granted by the U.S. Patent Office on a system for VOD embedded advertising. The system allowed for the embedding of standard commercial spots as well as translucent logo-bugs, graphic frames, video banners, and animated lower-third graphics (Magnussen & Bradley, 2006). The system gives the operator the ability to keep track of how many times an advertiser's message is viewed; the cost of the advertisement is then based on the number of views the advertisement received. The system gives the operator and advertiser the option of on-demand programming with standard commercials, showing the program without interruption by using snipes and bugs for their messaging.

Systems such as this could give the audience the freedom of watching a program without interruption while still providing the advertisers with a platform for their message. This system gives the advertiser and operator more control over how the advertisements are executed and affords them the freedom to experiment with different options and combinations of delivery. In the future a more advanced version of this system or a new system could then afford the operator the ability to target messages to specific consumers rather than a blanket advertisement to everyone who viewed the program. These are the types of innovations that will keep television competitive in the digital advertising world.

### Interactive Television

As *interactive television* (iTV) begins to disseminate into households, snipes could potentially be used to link consumers to product information or to make direct purchases. Cauberghe and De Pelsmacker (2006) define iTV as “a group of technologies that gives the users the possibility to take control over their TV experience, enabling interactivity with the content” (23). Interactive television and *Internet Protocol Television* (IPTV) both offer the ability to provide snipes that are interactive. Both interactive television and IPTV have the capacity to

offer customized snipes based on the viewers viewing habits in the same manner that the internet can provide unique marketing based on user profiles.

Interactive Television provides the audience with engagement that is advantageous to both the content producers and advertisers. According to research by MTV, “the more involved a viewer is with the content, the more effective the advertising is for that viewer” (as cited in Hunt, 2009, p. 6). By creating an engaging environment for the viewer, content producers are enhancing the television experience. The implementation of interactive advertising enhances the users experience with the advertisement, thus increasing advertising effectiveness.

In 2008 Domino’s Pizza worked with TiVo to create interactive advertisements in which users could order pick-up or delivery pizza from their television sets using their remote controls (Eaton, 2008). Domino’s ran another interactive television campaign in United Kingdom (U.K.), where it partnered with Sky One. The campaign elevated Domino’s to the No. 1 pizza delivery company in the U.K., increased its market share by 4%, and increased brand awareness by 16% (Domino’s Pizza, 2008).

The previous examples do not mark Domino’s first entries into the interactive television market. In 1999 Domino’s Pizza teamed up with B3TV, a San Francisco based e-commerce provider, to air interactive ads during reruns of *Star Trek* on a local UPN affiliate KBHK-TV; interactivity was not made possible through over-the-air broadcasting but through the now defunct *Microsoft Web TV* receiver and the *EchoStar DISHplayer* (Domino’s to beam, 1999). While the technology may still seem futuristic to some, it has been around for over a decade and is already available to millions of homes.

Though Domino's was one of the first companies to both explore and find success with iTV advertisements, others have heightened brand awareness by employing use of the technology. Budweiser did an iTV promotion for *FIFA 2006 World Cup* that included a contest to win tickets to the cup finals that involved playing a branded videogame called *Heads Up* that viewers could play using their remote control (Budweiser: Case Studies, 2006). The research found that interactors saw Budweiser as "modern and up-to-date, a good quality lager, involved with football and particularly refreshing" (Budweiser: Case Studies, 2006, par 11). The power of the interactive message aided Budweiser in improving its brand image with European consumers; 90% of interactors said they were more likely to drink Budweiser after having the interactive experience regardless of previous temperament towards the brand (Budweiser: Case Studies, 2006, par 14).

Interactive advertisements can be executed in a variety of ways. The *Wink* iTV platform used by OpenTV in the U.S. works by overlaying an interactivity icon over a standard commercial (Bellman, Schweda, & Varan, 2009, p. 15). The interactive icon is in essence a snipe placed over an advertisement. Interactive icons could just as easily be superimposed over programming as a snipe. If executed correctly, interactive snipes could marry the nonskip ability of snipes with the engagement of iTV.

RQ 10: Have video content providers developed snipes that are enabled for interactive television?

### Diffusion of Innovation

*Diffusion* is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 1995, p. 5). In this study

the members of a social system are the employees of cable television networks and broadcast television stations in the United States. According to Rogers (1995) an innovation is “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (p.11). There are three social circles within the American television system; the first is the inner-circle of employees at each network or station, the second is the circle that includes all networks or stations within a specific media conglomerate, and the third is a broad outer-circle that encompasses the industry. One goal of this study is to examine how much, if any, communication regarding the use and practices of snipes are exchanged between these social circles.

### Characteristics of Innovation

According to Rogers there are five characteristics of innovation. The first characteristic of innovation is *Relative Advantage*, which is defined as “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes. The degree of relative advantage may be measured in economic terms, but social prestige, convenience, and satisfaction are also important factors” (Rogers, 1995, p 15). The economic factors alone could be seen as a relative advantage of monetizing snipes by selling them to advertisers. According to Rogers (1995) “The greater the perceived relative advantage of an innovation, the more rapid its rate of adoption will be” (p. 15).

The second characteristic of innovation is *Compatibility* which Rogers (1995) defines as “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of potential adopters” (p. 15). In regards to snipes and bugs, compatibility could also be a technological issue. Because snipes and bugs require specialized equipment to place them overtop of programming, issues of compatibility with other systems could hinder a

station from adopting the technology. This could be an issue that is more specific to local broadcast stations, especially stations in smaller markets or those that belong to smaller media companies. If an idea is not compatible with the values and norms of a social system, the innovation will not be adopted or adopted at a slower rate than an idea that is compatible (Rogers, 1995, p 16). If a network places high value on issues such as the audience viewing experience or the social norm is to minimize the presence of advertisers, this could create incompatibility. Rogers (1995) stated that the “adoption of an incompatible innovation often requires the prior adoption of a new value system which is a relatively slow process” (p. 16). Changes in ownership or management, pressure from advertisers, or changes in the industry could lead to a new value system.

*Complexity* is the third characteristic of innovation; complexity is “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use. Some innovations are readily understood by most members of the social system; others are more complicated and will be adopted more slowly” (Rogers, 1995, p 16). The degree of complexity in regard to understanding and using snipes could vary greatly depending on the research that has been conducted by or is available to a network or station. The amount of resources available to study, plan, and manage the implementation of snipes could greatly simplify or complicate the innovation.

*Trialability* is the third characteristic of innovation; it is “the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. New ideas that can be tried on the installment plan will generally be adopted more quickly than innovations that are not divisible.” (Rogers, 1995, p 16). Networks and stations that already have the proper equipment and staff to implement snipes on a trial basis, whether for internal promotions or externally advertising, should be more likely to adopt the innovation and do so at a faster rate than those that do not

have the necessary resources already on-hand.

The fifth characteristic of innovation is *Observability*. Rogers (1995) defines observability as “the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. The easier it is for individuals to see the results of an innovation, the more likely they are to adopt it.” (p. 16). Research that demonstrates the effectiveness of snipes will lead to a faster rate of adoption. If snipes demonstrate profitability without violating social norms or values, it should lead to a faster rate of adoption of snipes for advertisements.

### The Innovation Decision Process

According to Rogers (1995) there are five steps to the innovation decision process. The first step of the innovation decision process is *knowledge*, which “occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) learns of an innovation's existence and gains some understanding of how it functions” (Rogers, 1995, p.22). The amount of knowledge or understanding of snipes may vary greatly from network to network. This knowledge may vary greatly between national networks and local broadcast stations. *Persuasion* is the second step in the innovation decision process, it “occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) forms a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation” (Rogers, 1995, p.22). Research, financial benefit, audience feedback, and advertiser influence could all persuade networks and stations to adopt or not to adopt the use of snipes.

The third step in the process is the *decision* itself that “occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) engages in activities that lead to a choice to adopt or reject the innovation” (Rogers, 1995, p.22). The decision to adopt or not adopt snipes may have been made through extensive discussion and research by a group of decision makers or may have

simply been an arbitrary choice by a single decision maker. *Implementation* is the fourth step in the innovation decision process that “occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) puts an innovation to use. Reinvention is especially likely to occur at the implementation stage” (Rogers, 1995, p.22). There are a number of similarities in the manner in that networks have implemented snipes, yet there are a variety of differentiation in style and execution. Reinvention may play a large role during the implementation of snipes. The fifth and final stage of the innovation decision process is *confirmation*. According to Roger (1995) confirmation “occurs when an individual (or other decision-making unit) seeks reinforcement of an innovation-decision that has already been made, but the individual may reverse this previous decision if exposed to conflicting messages about the innovation” (Rogers, p.22). In this stage audience feedback and research could be used to confirm or refute the decision and implementation of snipes. Program ratings, website traffic, and product sales could also be involved in the confirmation process.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Qualitative Research

The purpose of this study is to explore the use, innovations, and future of snipes in the American television industry. Because snipes have yet to be studied academically, knowledgeable individuals who work in American television cable networks and broadcast stations, and have direct involvement with the use of snipes or the refusal to adopt snipes were interviewed to assess the different approach each network or station have taken in the implementation of snipes. Identifying individuals with the appropriate level of experience is a key consideration in the respondent selection process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179). Though there are many specific areas regarding snipes that could be studied, an overall broad foundation is desirable to assist with future explorations into the subject. A quantitative approach to snipe advertising would be difficult to assess because of the lack of information and distinction between what is a paid advertisement, a value-add, or an in-house promotion. Additionally, this research is exploratory in nature because a thorough literature search yield no previously conducted study similar. Therefore, qualitative interviewing was chosen as the research model for this study. The use of the long-format, qualitative interview allows the researcher to increase his or her knowledge of a subject by allowing the respondents to describe a situation in their own words (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179).

#### Research Method

For the purpose of this study, qualitative research was selected. According to Petersone (2004) qualitative research methods are the most suitable to ascertain a subject that is complex and ambiguous. The qualitative method is valuable in exploratory research and is valuable in



generating a deeper understanding of a subject matter. The method was based on the long respondent interview process.

In 1944, Paul Lazarsfeld described the general goals and guidelines of the respondent interview, they are as follows

1. Clarify the meanings of common concepts and opinions.
2. Distinguish the decisive elements of an expressed opinion.
3. Determine what influenced a person to form an opinion or act in a certain way.
4. Classify complex attitude patterns.
5. Understand the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act.

(as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 178).

The goals of these respondent interviews are to:

1. Clarify the common practices and opinions of snipes.
2. Distinguish the decisive elements of innovation.
3. Determine what factors influence the video content providers to form their philosophy on snipes and the factors that led to their current policies on snipe usage.
4. Classify complex patterns of corporate structure that lend to or hinder innovation.
5. Understand the interpretations that video content providers attribute to their motivations of adoption or rejection of the use of snipes.

The interview protocol was designed to clarify complex issues that pertain to the current and future use of snipes in the American television industry. The participants include both males and females who at the time of the interviews were employed by a broadcast or cable television network or local broadcast station or affiliate. Telephone interviews were conducted during February and March 2010. The participants supplied the researcher with their contact

information and times in that they would be available for the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The respondents granted the researcher permission to make an audio recording of the interview.

### Participants

The participants are individuals who are considered experts on snipes and have the knowledge of the current and future use of snipes. Because this research is focused on the American television industry, all respondents are employees at an American cable television network or local broadcast affiliate station. The respondents each work in a department that has direct knowledge of their networks use and development of snipes; those departments include advertising, sales, marketing, and promotions.

Eight participants were selected for this study. The sample size was based on McCracken's (1988) recommendations that a sample size of eight was sufficient for qualitative interviewing as it is vital to work thoroughly with a small number of participants rather than superficially with many. The participants for this study were selected based on a combination of the following sampling strategies: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling, allows the researcher to use his or her judgment and select respondents to be included in the sample. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique in that participants are located through referrals.

### Data Collection

The data for this research were obtained through 17 questions that are included in the interview protocol (Appendix A). Some of the questions have corresponding probes. The long interview process can also lead to new questions being formed based on responses or other comments by the respondent. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and recorded

digitally using the Avid Systems Pro Tools audio recording and editing software suite. Later the interviews were transcribed for further analysis.

### Data Analysis

The audio of each telephone interview was recorded digitally. The recordings were then transcribed. The transcription allowed for discovery of individual themes. The transcripts were coded during the data analysis. The respondents were grouped by cable network or broadcast affiliate and then assigned numbers based on the order in that their interviews took place.

### Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was confidential. The research is presented in a completely anonymous form. The names of the respondents were kept anonymous. The names of the participants' organizations and affiliations were not identified; neither were their gender or job titles. The researcher understands the responsibility of maintaining the respondents' confidentiality.

The respondents were informed of all procedures related to the safeguarding of data and the reporting of findings. The data collection involved telephone interviews. With the permission of the respondents, an audio recording was made of the interview. Data were securely stored on a password protected, solid-state flash drive and locked in the student investigators office, along with any written hard copies. Respondents were given confirmation that the data were only accessible to the faculty advisor, Dr. Stephen W. Marshall, the Institutional Review Board of East Tennessee State University, and the researcher. In accordance with Institutional Review Board regulations, after 10 years the data will be destroyed by shredding documents and deleting computer files.

To ensure that respondents were informed and understood issues related to maintenance of confidentiality, they received a letter of solicitation (Appendix B) and an informed consent form (Appendix C). Participation in this research was voluntary. If a respondent decided to quit or refused to participate, the benefits or treatments to which they would have otherwise entitles would not be affected. In the case that a respondent withdrew, all records of his or her participation would be destroyed.

The respondents were encouraged to ask questions regarding the research, the reporting and maintenance of data, as well as the researcher's professional and academic background. Each respondent received equal treatment. Respondents were informed that they could contact the researcher after the interview if they had any additional question about the study and its findings. If necessary the respondents were allowed to provide additional information to the research via follow-up interviews or through e-mail.

Each respondent is either an employee of a cable television network or a broadcast television affiliate and is labeled as cable network or broadcast affiliate. Each network or affiliate was assigned a number based on the order that their interview took place. Therefore there are cable networks 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 and broadcast affiliates 1 and 2.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This chapter contains the results obtained through the interviews with eight respondents from five cable networks and two broadcast affiliate stations. The results have been broken into six sections based on implementation, usage, demographics, research, clutter, and corporate structure.

#### The Implementation of Snipes

The first question each respondents was asked is if each video content provider used snipes for promotional purposes. Each of the seven video content providers was using snipes, at the time of the interviews; though, broadcast affiliate 2 was ending the practice due to technical issues. A follow-up probe question asked how long each video content provider had been engaging in the practice of using snipes for promotional purposes.

- Cable Network 5 – 1995 = (15 years)
- Cable Network 2 – 1998 = (12 years) – {use of countdown bugs}  
2002 = (8 years) – {major use of snipes}
- Broadcast Affiliate 2 – 2000 = (10 years)
- Cable Network 1 – 2004 = (6 years)
- Cable Network 3 – 2004 = (6 years)
- Cable Network 4 – 2005 = (5 years)
- Broadcast Affiliate 1 – 2006 = (4 years)

It should be noted that these numbers reflect the approximation of the respondents' knowledge and recall and may not be 100% accurate.

The second question inquired as to whether or not the video content providers were allowing advertisers to place sponsored messages in programming via snipes. Cable networks 3, 4, and 5 did allow advertisers the use of snipes, while cable network 1 and 2 did not. Broadcast affiliate 1 does not allow advertisers the use of snipes, while broadcast affiliate 2 had but only on one occasion. The first probe for the video content providers that did use snipes for advertisements was when they first began this practice.

- Broadcast affiliate 2 – 2004 = (6 years)
- Cable network 4 – 2005 = (5 years)
- Cable network 3 – 2006 = (4 years)
- Cable network 5 – 2009 = (1 year)

Once again it should be noted these numbers reflect the approximation of the respondents' knowledge and recall and may not be 100% accurate.

A second probe for the respondents that responded positively to question 2 was if the sponsored snipes were sold as a separate ad-unit, if it was a value-add, or if it was part of an overall package.

- Cable network 3 – Both
- Cable network 4 – Value-add/Package
- Cable network 5 – Value-add/Package
- Broadcast affiliate 2 – Separate Ad-Unit

In order to better understand who is driving the innovation of advertiser snipe, the four respondents that had allowed advertisers the use of snipes were asked if it was the advertisers who requested the use of snipes or if the sales department made the offer to the advertisers.

- Broadcast affiliate 2 – Sales Department
- Cable network 3 – Sales Department
- Cable network 4 – Advertiser
- Cable network 5 – Advertiser

#### Strategies of Snipe Usage

Questions were developed to identify strategies and planning themes to establish if video content providers are carefully planning the use of snipes and to determine the amount of detail that goes into the planning process. The respondents were asked if snipes appear more frequently in certain types of programming. All of the respondents answered no, that they did not have a genre of programming that snipes were used more frequently. However, the cable networks all had specific programming that they used snipes less frequently. Cable network 1, a news network, uses snipes less frequently during news specials. Cable networks 2, 3, 4, and 5 use snipes less frequently during premiers of original programming. The cable networks kept the premier airing of original programming less cluttered, but those episodes may have a higher frequency of snipe usage within subsequent re-airings of the program.

The respondents were asked if there are certain programs or genres that the video content providers had decided not to air snipes. Broadcast affiliate 1 does not allow any snipes during news programs. According to cable network 3 they had one series that they did not use snipes

except to promote information regarding the series itself. The respondents from cable network 3 stated that the program dealt with a very serious subject matter and that:

We feel its best not to promote during those times for we feel that would be off color and not appropriate. We will promote something if it is within the context of the show. For instance, “season one on DVD now available” kind of thing that ties back to the actual show; that’s fine. But we will not use it as a platform to promote other venues. - Also, “tune in for the show” we will push a self value, a new episode kind of thing, but that’s about it.

The respondent from cable network 5 said that, “There is rarely ever a show that is not going to have any (snipes) in it. Actually that would be really never unless it’s a live event or something like that.”

Respondents were asked if the video content providers were using snipes more frequently during certain dayparts. Cable network 5 uses snipes consistently throughout all dayparts but noted that, “We would tailor the language based on when they (snipes) air though or we main run certain one versus others.” Cable networks 2 and 3 do not use snipes during the morning hours because those hours do not count toward their ratings. According to the respondent from cable network 4:

Most of those more specific snipes that drive to our website run primarily during the day. And then the snipes that, promote our original shows run pretty much, you know, 24 – 7. And primarily, prime time hours are blocked off just to promote our original shows.

Broadcast affiliates 1 and 2 do not take dayparts or program genre into consideration when scheduling snipes. Broadcast affiliate 1 only promotes local news and local sports programming, so snipes are used during the programs that are lead-ins. The original snipe



scheduling strategy for broadcast affiliate 2 was to simply promote *up next* programming, informing the viewer of the next program in the line-up. Due to technical issues broadcast affiliate 2 was eventually unable to air snipes during syndicated video content that meant that it could only use snipes over network programming. At that point snipes only promoted its late night newscast that aired once during the last half hour of prime time and was triggered on air by the network.

Cable network 2 uses two primary strategies when scheduling snipes. The first strategy is the aforementioned leaving premier shows less cluttered; the other strategy is called *grip*. The respondent from cable network 2 explains how the two strategies work together:

If we have a (a premier episode of a prime time show) airing that day we will try to grip the available audience that is watching all day long and try promote (that show) all day long via the graphics, in addition to the promo spots. And once you get to that (show) we try to leave that clean because it's a premier and we don't like to bother the audience but you may see for a couple of seconds, in segment one or two, and it's not very intrusive, but a bug (or snipe) for either the premier of a show at the same time slot for tomorrow night or some other big event that may be happening over the weekend, or some big pro-social initiative, like something for Haiti, or just getting text. But like I said the grip strategy get them to our (prime slot), then after that we try to keep it clean. Toward the end of the show in the last minute we might talk about the upcoming show.

### The Use of Audience Demographics

In order to better determine the amount of planning that goes into snipe scheduling research questions 4 and 5 regard the role that audience demographics plays in the use of snipes.

Broadcast affiliates 1 and 2 did not use audience demographics as part of the snipe scheduling process. Cable networks 2, 3, 4, and 5 base their snipe scheduling strategy on audience demographics. According to cable network 3 the strategy it uses is based on each individual show:

If it is a good fit for that show and I want to promote the next episode of that show that kind of has a connection with it – same audience, same demographics. Yeah, everything is kind of just an equal promotional by show everyday within a half an hour to an hour segment.

The respondent from cable network 5 describes the effort that goes into analyzing audience data to schedule snipes:

Yeah a lot of that is looked into (audience demographics) I know by not only the coordinators but the manger. So all of that is taken into account, it's not just random. There are a lot of different factors taken into account.

According to the respondent from cable network 4, it uses audience demographics and other data to plan snipe use and gauge effectiveness; but it is a difficult process and the data are not always available:

Yeah, we do look at that (audience demographics) sometimes it's hard because I say sometimes we only get that research information after the fact. Like after something has aired we will look at the research and go ahead and see like... who is watching and if ratings or traffic toward the website improved based on what snipes we ran. But we definitely do try to consider all those factors.

Cable network 1 does not use audience demographics to schedule snipes because it is a news network. It uses snipes to promote stories that link, so rather than being demographic driven it is “topic driven”.

### The Role of Research in Innovation

Research should play a vital role in dealing with the complexity of the innovation of both promotional snipes and lower-third advertising. Research questions 1 and 3 deal with snipe research. Research question 1 asked if the video content providers or their parent companies had looked at or conducted any research that gauges audience attitudes of snipes. In media the audience is the commodity; therefore, it is critical to have an accurate understanding of how snipes can affect viewership.

Broadcast affiliates 1 and 2 have not conducted any research relating to audience attitudes of snipes. The respondent from cable network 1 assumes that research on audience attitudes has been conducted by the network but had no knowledge of the results if research was indeed conducted. The respondent from cable network 5 was also unaware of research on audience attitudes of snipes, while its sister network, cable network 4, had conducted audience research. The research that cable network 4 conducted was either not shared with sister cable network 5, or the respondent from cable network 5 was not given access to the research.

Cable network 2 conducted extensive research on audience attitudes of snipes. One discovery of their research was that snipes that appear during dramatic or emotional moments are annoying to the audience and can disrupt the narrative. This finding led cable network 2 to work with the video content producers to establish safe zones to avoid placing snipes over transitions, fades, or emotional moments. Cable network 2 shared its research with sister cable network 3.

One of the respondents of from cable network 3 is in charge of graphic scheduling for the network. Using data from the research, the respondent worked with the video content producers to set up production parameters for snipes:

...from the studies we have found that coming out from the commercials people want us to give them a message as soon as possible and leave them alone to enjoy the rest of the show. So that was the primary feedback that they received from viewers. Right now what I do is in the first 25 seconds of a show when you come in from commercial it is clear of in show lower-thirds. Meaning the in show ...they cannot put up a name because they have to allot the first 25 seconds for me for commercial graphics. In addition to that, the show producers also provide me with what we like to call a woo spot; which we in the industry call a *window of opportunity*. This is a 2<sup>nd</sup> spot in a show segment that's about 3 minutes into the program.

Research question 3 asked if the video content providers or their parent companies have conducted or commissioned any research on the effectiveness of snipes. Broadcast affiliates 1 and 2 had not conducted any research on the effectiveness of snipes. The respondent from cable network 1 has no knowledge of any research on snipe effectiveness. Cable networks 4 and 5 has research available regarding effectiveness of snipes based on data such as ratings and website traffic correlation to on-air promotional strategies, which includes snipes.

Cable Network 2 had conducted research with viewers to gauge audience recall to determine if snipes were effective. The research examined different types of snipes such as animated and static; also the research studied how screen location could influence the snipe's effectiveness. The respondent from cable network 2 had access to and extensive knowledge of the research and used that knowledge to guide the planning and scheduling of snipes. Cable

network 2 rebranded its on-air graphics, snipes, bugs, and promotional elements based on its research.

Cable network 3 had access to and extensive knowledge of research conducted by its sister network, cable network 2. Research also led cable network 3 to rebrand its graphics package and alter its snipe scheduling strategy. The knowledge gained by research allowed cable networks 2 and 3 to innovate the production and planning process.

### Clutter and Interruption

One of the most prominent themes that emerged in the review of literature was the concern that snipes could create visual clutter. Research questions 2 and 6 asks if the video content providers were concerned that snipes could coverup important visual content or create too much visual clutter. All of the respondents have concerns about clutter.

Broadcast affiliate 1 has concerns that snipes could create visual clutter or cover up important visual content. To combat this they try to use snipes sparingly. Broadcast affiliate 2 also has concerns about clutter based on previous audience feedback over clutter produced by their station logo years before:

It is a matter of common sense. You're looking at a screen and if you're putting your bug overtop a (network) bug or some other syndicated bug – it's just a clutter if you do get too much of it up.

Cable network 1 has changed the design of its snipes over time to make it reduce clutter. Because cable network 3 is a news network, the snipes are generally placed on the screen live by

production so that it does not cover up other graphics on the screen. Cable network 4 works to reduce clutter by keeping the size of snipes under control:

We don't want our snipes to be too big and I'm not sure of the exact measurements, but there are measurements that we adhere to. Such as, we don't let snipes take up to the bottom half or portion of the screen. On some networks you'll have a snipe up and it will block out or cover a significant amount of context and we try to keep ours relatively small.

Cable network 4 also takes steps to prevent snipes from covering up important visual information, like credits and subtitles:

Programming they'll flag movies that have subtitles and will let us know what segments of the movie where a snipe could be obtrusive. So the programming department will flag a lot of that information for movies and we will just work around that and not have snipes appear. Also, network television premiers or original shows we do have snipes that pop up, but not as many and usually they are the simple kind that will be text only and not too showy. But for all of those, any network television premiers or new airings of an original episode we screen those episodes first before we schedule snipes in them. This is so that we are more aware of the snipe placement. There have been times, especially in original episodes that we make sure to pull the snipes before an opening or opening song that would appear. We do that also in originals to work around when the credits will come on. So I would say we do screen a lot of our programs before.

Cable network 5 also uses prescreening methods to combat clutter and limit annoyance to the viewer:

But that's the thing that we take into consideration is viewership, that is the whole thing that keeps us going. So our ratings, viewership, that is what brings us the revenue. So that's when things come into play like pre-screening show and things like that. We take care to ensure that it's not becoming a nuisance... But going further than that, even if there is nothing visually on the screen (graphics) but it is a really intense moment in the show, we'll only put the bug there so we are not distracting the viewer.

The audience research that cable network 2 conducted, discussed in the previous section, led it and sister cable network 3 to change their on-air graphics packages. Both networks also work with video content producers to establish production guidelines; these guidelines work to eliminate clutter and prevent snipes from covering important visual information. According to the respondent from cable network 2, even with all of its measures, snipes will still cover up visuals from time to time:

...if the people in programming schedule an old show and that show is produced without regard the style guide, which is the safe zones and where to put your graphics, so that our bug messaging doesn't step on it. Every now and then it is going to happen and you just can't avoid it but it's something that we are defiantly aware of and really try hard to avoid... and I think we've been really successful about it.

### Corporate Structure

The rigidity or openness of corporate structure could work to hinder or foster innovation. Therefore, each respondent was asked if each network or station has control over how it has adopted and use snipes or if it is a decision of their parent company. Every respondent said that each network or station has individual control over the adoption and use of snipes. The

respondent from broadcast affiliate 2 noted that the parent company would have to approve the purchase of any equipment necessary to air snipes; but other than that, each station has its own control.

Research questions 7 asked the broadcast affiliates if their networks allow them to air snipes over network programming. The answer to that question is that each affiliate is given one spot in the half-hour before its nightly news cast to air a snipe to promote its local news.

Research question 8 asked the cable networks if they allow cable or satellite providers the ability place snipes over their network programming; all 5 cable networks answered no.

In an attempt to gauge what new snipe innovations may be on the horizon, research question 10 asks the video content providers if they had or were planning on creating snipes that are enabled for interactive television. The broadcast affiliates have no plans for interactive snipes or interactive television. The respondent from cable network 1 did not know the specifics of iTV development but did know that it was in the works and thought snipes would be apart of iTV.

Cable 3 and 4 had developed and aired interactive snipes. These so-called interactive snipes were actually lower-thirds that contained chat messages or facebook pokes submitted by viewers online. This form of interactive snipes is not an iTV application; however, it does allow the viewer to be involved with the content and increases audience engagement.



## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the summary of findings and the implications of the current and future usage of snipes. It also details the strengths and weakness of this study. Furthermore, the researcher provides suggestions on how the industry could improve the planning and execution of snipes and offers suggestions for future research.

The results are examined using Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory. According to Rogers (1995) diffusion is "the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (p.5) and an innovation is "an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption" (p.11). The research questions are broken down into five categories based on their relation to Roger's five characteristics of innovation, relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability.

#### Relative Advantage

Relative Advantage is "the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it superseded. The degree of relative advantage may be measure in economic terms, but social prestige, convenience, and satisfaction are also important factors" (Rogers, 1995, p.15). According to Rogers (1995) "the greater the perceived relative advantage of an innovation, the more rapid its rate of adoption" (p.15). Each of the video content providers saw the relative advantage of snipes as a promotional tool; however, there was disagreement in the relative advantage of snipes for commercial use.

Research question 1 asks respondents if their network or station uses snipes as a promotional tool. All five cable networks and both broadcast affiliates were using snipes for promotions at the time of the interview. Broadcast Affiliate 2, however, was in the process of ending the practice due to technical issues.

Research question 2 asks each network or station if it allows advertisers the use of snipes. Three of the five cable networks were selling snipes to advertisers, cable networks 3, 4, and 5; these networks saw the relative advantage of snipes in terms of financial benefit. Broadcast affiliate 1 had never sold snipes to advertisers while Broadcast Affiliate 2 had; however this was only on one occasion years ago and they never pursued the sale of snipes after that time. According to broadcast affiliate 2 it saw no advantage in monetizing snipes, “it’s never been seen as a big advertising draw or big potential.” The respondent from cable network 2 stated:

That is one thing that our brand refuses to do (sponsorship graphics) and that includes sponsorship information into our promos as well. That is something that we’ve really held ourselves back from and that’s good because once you do it for one advertiser, it looks like you’re selling out.

Cable network 2 saw sponsored or commercial snipes as potentially harming its brand image and therefore a disadvantage.

### Compatibility

Compatibility is “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences, and needs of the adopters” (Rogers, p.15). Compatibility issues that interfered with the use of snipes for advertising were generally related to the values

and social norms of the video content providers. Technical compatibility issues also arose during the study.

Cable network 1 would not sell snipes to advertisers because it was a news network and it wants to “prevent a conflict of interest or the perception of a conflict of interest”. Cable network 2 had recently conducted research with its viewers about snipes that include sponsored snipes; the respondent for Cable Network 2 stated that its audience is “savvy of that stuff and don’t want to be sold anything” and added that “other networks do that and yes it makes money for them but, we don’t want to look that cheap to our audience”.

In the case of broadcast affiliate 2, issues with compatibility were technical issues. When it switched from a tape-based system to air syndicated programming to a server-based system, the server and the graphic system to air snipes had phase issues and therefore were no longer compatible. Because of the phase issues broadcast affiliate 2 only used snipes during network programming. After the switch to digital television the local cable providers began taking the high-definition signal of broadcast affiliate 2 and cropping it down from a 16:9 ratio to a 4:3 ratio; this method caused the snipes to be cut off. Also the graphic equipment to place snipes used by broadcast affiliate 2 are standard definition, which caused other issues with their high definition signal.

Cable networks 3, 4, and 5 found that selling snipes to advertisers was compatible with their values and social norms. The wants of the advertisers and the need to increase revenue through sales were driving forces behind the monetization of snipes. A respondent from cable network 3 stated that:

Right now there is a culture here, at least at (our network), that ad sales really rule the roost. They can bring in the money and what they need right now is graphics. We really try to create a landscape where you know, there is some restraint, we're considerate of the viewer; but at the end of the day when you hear an advertiser is willing to spend a million-dollars if they can get graphics nobody wants to here the word no.

### Complexity

Complexity is “the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use. Some innovations are readily understood by most members of the social system; others are more complicated and will be adopted more slowly” (Rogers, 1995, p.16). Research was indeed a variable that aided the decision-making process for several of the cable networks, specifically cable networks 2 and 3. Complexity was overcome through research, as it increased knowledge and simplified the innovation. The greater the depth of research the greater the understanding each network had about how to best use and execute snipes.

A study conducted by cable network 2 indicated the audience attitudes of snipes along with the most effective screen locations, duration, frequency, and amount of animation. The results of that study were shared with its sister network, cable network 3. Though both networks looked at the same research, cable network 2 was against monetizing snipes while cable network 3 was very aggressive about increasing profit through the use of snipes. The issue of selling snipes to advertisers was a compatibility issue and not an issue of complexity.

The effective scheduling of snipes is a very involved and time consuming process. The visual elements in video content can influence the effectiveness of snipes, and in kind, snipes can affect the viewing experience. Cable networks 4 and 5 have a member of the promotions

department prescreen original programming and specials before they air, to find the premiere spots to place snipes and to insure the best possible viewing experience. Prescreening programming helps to minimize the chance that the audience will be annoyed by snipes; but it means that an employee must spend approximately 45 minutes to prescreen every hour of programming, which can be costly in terms of labor.

Cable network 2 and 3 have simplified the complexity of scheduling snipes by requiring the video content producers to follow certain guidelines regarding the use and placement of graphics. A respondent from cable network 3 explained how its guidelines work:

We actually have a real estate grid where they (video content producers) can't crash into my section. - They are given a real estate grid where they can't come into my promotional area at all. (A respondent from cable network 3) really had to take the lead in establishing protocol and process with a lot of outside production companies that access or make our shows... So establishing a physical lay out on the screen, a very clear device to be able to send to producers, which was done by our graphics department, so they (video content producers) can understand the way the landscape looks on a show (on our network)... this is your window of when you can do your thing, and here is the window when I'm going to be allowed to promote, whether it is our own product, a partner, or advertisers. So it is really a kind of a choreography of the layout of the screen.

The steps taken by cable networks 2, 3, 4, and 5 are not only to make sure that they are not placing snipes over graphics in the video content, they are also making sure that snipes do not interrupt an emotional part of the narrative.

### Trialability

Trialability is “the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis. New ideas that can be tied on the installment plan will generally be adopted more quickly than innovations that are not divisible” (Rogers, 1995, p.16). Every cable network and broadcast affiliate in this study had the proper graphic equipment to use snipes. Because all of the video content providers were using snipes for promotional purposes, each had the proper equipment and staff to experiment with sponsored snipes.

Cable network 5, recently had trial run with sponsored snipes as part of the Ask.com, lower-third campaign. The successful execution of that campaign has lead to a second advertiser purchasing a package that includes snipes. The respondent from cable network 5 looks for this trend of commercial snipe usage to continue as it is a win for both the advertiser and the video content provider.

### Observability

Observability is “the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. The easier it is for individuals to see the results of an innovation, the more likely they are to adopt it” (Rogers, 1995, p.16). Correlations between snipes, ratings, and website traffic lead to the observable effectiveness of snipes.

Cable networks 4 and 5 had analyzed data that showed a correlation between the use of snipes and increased viewership and website traffic. Research conducted by cable network 4 had indicated that some audience members were annoyed with snipes; however, data analysis revealed that snipes were effective at getting its message across. The respondent from cable network 4 stated:

There is always some people who find it (snipes) intrusive when they are watching the shows. But the overall point is that they do work to the extent that we want them to work. So even if they sometimes clutter your screen they drive our messaging across, so that there is no way that we would stop running them. The ability to observe effectiveness led to cable network 4's adoption of snipes for both promotional and commercial use.

### Implications of the Study

This study provides a foundation for future research on snipes and embedded advertising. Video content providers need to conduct research or have a third party conduct research on the effectiveness of and audience attitudes of snipes in order to properly execute snipes and make well informed decisions regarding their implementation. The results and implications of research should be effectively communicated to all of the essential personnel who sell, schedule, and create snipes. The respondents from cable networks 1, 4, and 5 said that their network or parent company had conducted research on snipes but were not sure and did not specifically know the results. Respondents from cable networks 2 and 3 had looked at the research conducted by their network or sister network, and it led each network to rebrand its graphics package and implement guidelines for video content production.

A question this study hoped to answer for the television viewer is, what will the future of television viewing look like in regards to the use of snipes. All of the respondents were aware that snipes could create clutter and all wanted to minimize the level of annoyance and disruption to the narrative. Cable networks 2, 3, 4, and 5 are taking steps to make sure that snipes do not cover up graphics and that they do not interrupt emotional moments in the narrative. However, these networks are only taking this action with original programming. At present snipes may

appear at any time during syndicated programs, which means that snipes during syndicated programming may cover graphics and appear during emotional or climatic moments in the narrative. The amount of clutter and disruption during syndicated programming or the re-running of older video content will most likely be higher until steps are taken to ensure the same carefully choreographed execution as with original programming.

One suggestion of the researcher would be industry-wide guidelines for snipe placement similar to that implemented by cable networks 2 and 3; in which the video content producer keeps the screen clean during certain times and instructs the video content providers when emotional or climatic scenes are, so that snipes do not interrupt a poignant moment. This information could not only be used during the first-run of a program but could also be used for syndication and online runs of the program. It would make fiscal sense for this information to be provided by the video content producer rather than each provider screening the content and duplicating the process multiple times. Syndicated programming currently gets stepped on by snipes because the content providers cannot justify the labor involved in the screening of content; if the information was provided with the programming, content providers could more carefully plan and execute snipes during syndicated content, much in the same manner as they currently do with original content.

Another suggestion of the researcher is the adoption of industry standard terminology for snipes. While most networks referred to snipes as snipes, cable networks 2 and 3 used the term “bugs” to describe them. The term lower-thirds are also used to formally describe snipes. Secondly, there are no terms to distinguish promotional snipes versus advertiser purchased snipes. In media there is a clear distinction made between promos and commercials; it would seem fitting that some distinction be made between snipes that are self promotion of the brand



versus those that have been purchased by an advertiser. A distinction could as be made if snipes are used for public service messages as well.

### Strengths of the Study

The first strength of this study is the method of long qualitative interviewing. The qualitative method is the most appropriate for exploration and evaluation of this complex and ambiguous subject and is the most valuable method to create a greater understanding concerning the implementation and future of snipes. The long interviews with the eight respondents, that represent five cable television networks and two broadcast television affiliates, provide invaluable insight from the professional knowledge and firsthand experience in the field of television.

The second strength of this study is represented by the diverse backgrounds of the respondents, that include on-air promotions, creative services, and marketing; the respondents have various experiences ranging from a mid-level local television market, to a top-ten local television market, all the way to nationally based basic cable networks. While, the information that each respondent has regarding snipes may be common knowledge among inner-circles with the U.S. television industry, this study worked to pool together their collective knowledge to establish a framework for future research. Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated that emerging patterns of response among participants indicate that the study has reached the “saturation point” when the “participants knowledgeable about the subject... repeat the same events and the same variety of interpretations” (p.73).

### Limitations of the Study

This study does not attempt to describe the totality of the use of snipes within the U.S. television industry. The small sample of respondents does not allow for generalization about the subject. The findings of the study represent the knowledge of the eight respondents and the practices of the television networks or broadcast affiliates in which they are employees. The “saturation point” of the observations of the respondents suggests that the study outlines general common characteristics about the present and potential future usage of snipes in the U.S. television industry.

The method of this study was telephone interviewing. Evidence from several studies suggests that differences in responses can be expected between telephone and face-to-face interviewing (Bishop, 1988; Leeuw, 1992). A study by Jackle et al. found no evidence that the presence of an interviewer influenced response quality. However, due to the nature of the work of the respondents, a telephone interview granted access that would not have been possible through face-to-face interviews.

The respondents were from various departments and had varying levels of experience. The amount of knowledge each respondent had could be due in part to his or her seniority or level of employment.

### Suggestions for Future Research

This study demonstrates that adoption of snipes, for the purpose of advertising, is still in the early adoption stage. Future studies could use diffusion of innovation theory to exam the adoption of snipes at a later time. In addition, a study on snipes could exam diffusion of innovation from quantitative perspective.

Secondly, there is a need for studies that examine the effectiveness of snipes. Effectiveness could be measured in relation to audience recall and retention. The effectiveness of various types of snipes (e.g. static, animated, and picture-in-picture) could also be measured. Thirdly, the effectiveness of snipes could be analyzed based on size, screen location, and duration. This would be invaluable both to the design and the scheduling of snipes.

Another study that would be beneficial is the examination of audience attitudes of snipes. Though some networks have done this research, it only applies to their specific brand and audience demographics. A quantitative study that includes a large sample size with a cross-sectional age range could reveal attitude differences based on age or generation. Audience attitudes could also vary based on whether they are presented with promotional snipes versus sponsored or advertiser snipes.

Next, a study could examine the need of snipes as defined by advertisers. As the study revealed several advertisers have sought out snipes as a way to drive their message across to the audience. Several respondents mentioned that snipes are something that advertisers want; however, it is unclear how many advertisers are seeking to use snipes. Are there a few innovative advertisers or is there a large constituent of advertisers looking to snipe as a possible solution or aid against ad-skipping?

Cable network 3 mentioned that it had to be careful placing snipes over certain celebrities to avoid the appearance that the celebrity is endorsing the brand or product. A study that examines the audience's perception of endorsement based on the placement of snipes in conjunction to celebrities or fictional characters. The implications of such a study could aid in the planning of

snipes. If the results indicated that there is a correlation it could be beneficial to brands that hold endorsement with celebrities to purchase snipes in conjunction with that celebrity.

Finally, this study only looked at a small sample of cable networks and local broadcast affiliates; research that examines a larger sample may find that new themes emerge. There is specific interest in the level of adoption and use of snipes by local broadcast affiliates.

Interviews or other studies of broadcast networks and their owned and operated stations could yield additional results not found in this study.

These are only some suggestions for additional research, but the lack of academic study of snipes lends to numerous possibilities and avenues of exploration. Commercials, advertising, and television play an enormous role in the consumer culture in the United States and abroad; knowledge of the effects and implication of this emerging form of advertising are vital not only to the television and video content industry but to the viewing public who consume these images.

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## APPENDIXES

### APPENDIX A

#### Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The goal of the study is to explore the use, innovations, and future of the snipe. Please help me achieve this goal by answering the follow questions. This interview is confidential. Neither your name nor the name of your organization will appear in my final report.

1. Does your network or station use snipes as a promotional tool?

*If yes:* When did the network begin the practice?

*If no:* Why is the network not currently utilizing this form of in-content promotions?

2. (*If 1 is yes*) Does your network or station allow advertisers the use of snipes?

*If yes:* When did the network begin the practice?

*Probe :* Is there a charge for the snipe or is it a value-add?

3. (*If 1 is no*) Though your network or station is not currently using snipes, are there any plans to implement the use of the technology in the future?

*If yes:* Is there a timeframe in which this change might take place?

4. (*If 2 is no*) Is your network considering shifting their advertising practices to include screen-overlay marketing?

*If yes:* When do you foresee this change happening?

*If no:* What is the rationale behind preventing advertisers from having access to snipes?

5. Have advertisers approached your network or station to request lower-thirds/snipes?  
*If yes:* When did this first take place?
6. *(If 1 is yes)* Do snipes appear more frequently in certain types of programming?  
*If yes:* What genres do snipes appear the most frequently?  
  
*Probe:* Why is it that these genres have a higher frequency of graphic overlays?
7. *(If 1 is yes)* Are there certain programs or genres that your network or station has decided not to place snipes?  
  
*If yes:* What genres does the network prevent the use of snipes?  
  
*Probe:* Why is it that these genres are exempt from the placement of graphic overlays?
8. *(If 1 is yes)* Are snipes used more frequently during certain dayparts?  
  
*If yes:* What times of day are snipes more prevalent?
9. *(If 1 is yes)* Does your network or station use audience demographics in the snipe scheduling process?
10. *(If 1 is yes)* Are audiences demographics a factor in what type of programs are promoted with snipes?
11. Has your network or station looked at or done any research that gauges audience attitudes of snipes?  
  
*If yes:* Did the results indicate that the audience saw it as an irritant?
12. Has your network or station conducted or commissioned any research on the effectiveness of snipes?  
  
*If yes:* When was the first research conducted?

13. Is your network or station concerned that snipes could create too much visual clutter?
14. Is your network or station concerned that snipes could cover up important visual content?
15. Does each network or station in your company have control over how they have adopted and utilize snipes or is it a decision of the parent company?

*Probe:* What department or departments make the decisions on how snipes are used?

16. *(If 1 is yes) (Broadcast Affiliate)* Does the network, in which your station is an affiliate, allow you to place snipes over network programming?

16. *(If 1 is Yes)(Cable Network)* Does your network allow cable or satellite providers the ability to place snipes over network programming?

17. *(If 1 is yes)* Has your network created any snipes that are enabled for interactive television?

*If yes:* When did they first do this?

*If no:* Has there been any discussions or plans to do so in the future?

## APPENDIX B

### Letter of Solicitation

Dear Ms. / Mr. \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Aaron Sharp. I am a master's student at East Tennessee State University. I am conducting a study about the use of snipes in American television.

I am writing to invite you to participate in an interview for this study. Your experience and knowledge of network television would make an invaluable contribution to the research. The goals of the study are, first, to learn how snipes are currently being utilized in the American television industry; second, to identify characteristic of innovation regarding the implementation of snipes; and third, to examine how the role of snipes may change in the near future. Your participation in this study would include a telephone interview that would last no longer than 45-minutes. The interview will be conducted at a time of your convenience, between February 15 and March 15, 2010.

Your participation in this study will be confidential. Neither your name nor the name of your organization will appear in my final report. I promise that I will respect your choice not to answer questions and share information that you find confidential.

I hope that you will be able to participate in this study. I am convinced that your experience would significantly contribute to the study of snipes in American television. Please let me know if you are interested in assisting my research and furthering the knowledge of this subject. I will be pleased to answer to answer any questions regarding the study or my educational and professional backgrounds.

I thank you in advance and I look forward to hearing from you!

Gratefully,

Aaron Sharp

## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Letter

Dear Participant:

My name is Aaron Sharp, and I am a graduate student at East Tennessee State University. I am working on my Master's degree in Professional Communication. In order to conclude my studies, I need to complete a research project. The name of my study is *Exploring the Lower-third: The Utilization, Innovations, and Future of Snipes in the American Television Industry*.

The purpose of this study is to learn how snipes are currently being utilized in the American television industry, to identify characteristic of innovation regarding the implementation of snipes, and to examine how the role of snipes may change in the near future. The procedures involve participating in a telephone interview about the history of your networks use of snipes. Interviews will last no longer than 45 minutes. The interviews will be conducted with eight marketing/advertising executives, each from a different American television network. With your permission, these interviews will be recorded. The participants will be interviewed based on the snowballing sampling strategy. The questions are provided to the participant in advance; they are included in the interview protocol and are enclosed along with the letter of solicitation.

There is minimal to no foreseeable personal risk associated with participation. Also, I understand that the interview is not designed to help me personally but the investigator hopes to learn more about the use of snipes in American television.



All information collected in the study is confidential, and your name will not be identified at any time. I understand that, if applicable, the recording of the interview will be kept by the student investigator for up to ten years before it will be destroyed. All data including audio-recordings and transcriptions will be kept on a password protected, solid-state flash drive and secured in the student investigators office. After five years the data will be erased.

This research, once completed, will be presented completely anonymous and confidential; there will be no way to connect your name with your responses. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the ETSU IRB (for non-medical research), DHHS, and personnel particular to this research (thesis chair) have access to the study records.

If you do not want to participate in the interview it will not affect you in any way. There are no alternative procedures except to choose not to participate in the study. Participation in this research interview is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or answer any questions. You can quit at any time. If you quit or refuse to participate, the benefits or treatment to which you are otherwise entitled will not be affected.

If you have any research-related questions or problems, you may contact me at (423) \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*. I am working on this project under the supervision of Dr. Steve Marshall. You may reach him at (423) 439-7575. Also, the chairperson of the Institutional Review Board at East Tennessee State University is available at (423) 439-6055 if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject. If you have any questions or concerns about the research and want to talk to someone independent of the research team or you can not reach the study staff, you may call an IRB Coordinator at (423) 439-6055 or (423) 439-6002.

Sincerely, Aaron Sharp

VITA

AARON M. SHARP

- Education: M.A. Professional Communication, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2010  
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A.S. Broadcasting, Northeast State Community College, Blountville, Tennessee 2004  
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